EMPEROR, INNKEEPER AND BABY

CHRISTMAS MORNING IS PERHAPS THE MOST APPROPRIATE AND AT THE SAME TIME MOST DIFFICULT TIME TO CONDUCT A WORSHIP SERVICE. AT NO OTHER TIME OF THE YEAR ARE WE QUITE AS JOYOUS, QUITE AS EXUBERANT AS AT THE OCCASION OF THE BIRTH OF OUR LORD. THERE IS ONLY ONE APPROPRIATE SUHJECT FOR A SERMON ON THIS DAY THAT IS THE ARRIVAL OF A NEW BORN KING. I HAD THE FEELING WHILE PREPARING THIS SERMON THAT ANYTHING I SAID WOULD DETRACT FRO M THE JOY OF THE DAY AND LIKEWISE NOTHING I COULD SAY COULD ADEQUATELY CONVEY THE HOLINESS THAT IS IN THE AIR TODAY.

IN THE SUNDAYS OF ADVENT I HAVE DISCUSSED THE PROPHECY, THE FORERUNNER, THE THEOLOGICAL PHENOMENON OF THE INCARNATION AND THE SECULARIZATION OF AMERICAN CHRISTMAS. TODAY I AM LEFT WITH ONLY ONE THING, THE FACT OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST. HOW CAN I ANNOUNCE IT ANY MORE BRILLIANTLY THAN LUKE AND MATTHEW HAVE, ? WHAT CAN I SAY TNAT WILL BE MOREM MEANINGFUL THAN THE ANGELS' DIVINE SIMPLICITY WHEN THEY ANNOUNCED THAT IN BETHLEHEM IN A MANGER, MEN MAY FIND CHRIST THE LORD. HOW, IN FIFTEEN MINUTES OF TALKING CAN I RELATE MORE PASSION THAN FLOWS THROUGH THE PHRASE "JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD HAS COME." YOU KNOW THE ANSWER, I CANNOT.

BECAUSE OF THIS I WILL STICK VERY CLOSE TO LUKE'S ACCOUNT, GOING OVER THE STORY YOU ALL KNOW SO WELL, HOPING THAT THROUGH A MUTUAL EFFORT THE TRADITIONAL WORDS WILL TAKE ON RNEWED SIGNIFICANCE.

IN RECENT YEARS CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS ARE DISCOVERING MORE AND MORE THAT EVERY PHRASE IN THE BIBLE HAS IMPORTANCE. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN NEW TEST. SCHOLARS WERE ADVOCATING DISCARDING ANY PARTS OF THE GOSPELS THAT DID NOT COINCIDE WITH HISTORICAL, SCIENTIFIC FACT. THEY WOULD TRIM AWAY THE MYTH AND LEGEND AND GET DOWN TO THE RAW FACTS. AS YOU CAN IMAGINE SOME OF THE FIRST THINGS TO GO WERE THE VIRGIN BIRTH, THE MELODRAMATIC BIRTH STORY OF JESUS, ANGELS AND WISEMEN AND SHEPHERDS. THESE THINGS COULDN'T BE PROVEN SO THEY WERE OF NO USE. THEIR CRY WAS, LET'S BE SCIENTIFIC ABOUT THIS, DO AWAY WITH ANYTHING THAT CONFLICTS WITH HUMAN REASON, LET'S THROW AWAY ALL THE CRUTCHES AND DEPEND SOLELY ON FACT.

ONE VERY FAMOUS EUROPEAN SCHOLAR, RUDOLPH BUTLMANN, REWROTE THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: DISCARDING EVERYTHING THAT APPEARED TO BE A MYTH, REARRANGING THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS TO MAKE THEM MORE PLAUSIBLE AND SO ON. WHAT HE PRODUCED WAS A THEOLOGICAL MASTERPIECE, UNFORTUNATELY IT WAS NO LONGER THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN.

TODAY THE TREND, THANKFULLY, IS IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, SCHOLARS ARE REALIZING THAT THE MEN WHO WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT WERE NOT INTELLECTUALLY INFERIOR, THEY WERE NOT TRYING TO PULL THE WOOL OVER ANY ONE'S EYES. THEY WERE SIMPLY ASTOUNDED AND ASTONISHED MEN, WHO EXPERIENCING THE STRANGEST AND MOST IMPORTANT PHENOMENON THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN, FELT COMPELLED TO WRITE DOWN WHAT HAD HAPPENED. IN THIS CONTEXT EVERY WORD MUST BE CONSIDERED AS SIGNIFICANT, EVERY PHRASE IS PACKED WITH MEANING,

regardless of whether it is historical fact.

THIS ALL A PLIES DIRECTLY TO THE ACCOUNT OF THE BIRTH OF OUR LORD. HOW ARRO* GANT AND PRESUMPTIOUS OF US TO DISCARD PART SAYING" THIS JUST COULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED." EVERY WORD RECORDED WAS DONE SO WITH THE PURPOSE OF CONVEYING THE WONDERFUL NEWS THAT THE WORD HAS BEEN MADE FLESH, THAT THE CHRIST HAS COME AMONG US TO OFFER THE LOVE AND REDEMPTIONOF GOD. WHETHER THE MEANS USED TO CONVEY THIS NEWS ARE HISTORICALLY ACCURATE ISNOT EVEN A QUESTION TO BE DISCUSSED.

LOOKING CLOSELY AT LUKE'S ACCOUNT OF THE HIRTH OF OUR LORD, I WOULD LIKE TO EXTRACT TWO INDIVIDUALS THAT PLAY PROMINANT ROLES, EXAMINE THEM CLOSELY AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THIS NEW BORN BABE.

THE FIRST IS CAESAR AUGUSTUS. AT THE TIME OF THE BIRTH OF ~~XXSMSXCAX~~ JESUS, CAESAR AUGUSTUS WAS THE MOST POWERFUL MAN ON THE EARTH. HIS REAL NAMEWAS GAIUS OCTAVIUS, AND HE WAS BORN THE GREAT NEPHEW OF JULIUS CAESAR, PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS OF THE ROMAN EMPERIOR'S TAHNKS TO WILLIAM SHAKESPEAR. HE WAS NAMED BY JULIUS CAESAR TO BE HIS HEIR AND AFTER THE ASSASINATION HE GRADUALLY ROSE THROUGH THE POWER STRUGGLES TO SUCCEED HIS UNCLE AS EMPEROR. HISTORIANS HAVE SAID OF HIM THAT HE FOUND ROME BRICK AND LEFT IT MARBLE. HIS ACCOMPLISHMENT INCLUDED ROADS THAT TODAY

EARN THE RESPECT OF ENGINEERS, BEAUTIFULXXXXXX BUILDINGS AND THE ACQUISTION OF MORE POWER, WEALTH AND PRESTIGE THAN ROME HAD EVER KNOWN.

THIS MAN GAIUS OCTAVIUS WHO WAS NAMED CAESAR AUGUSTUS WAS THE ONE THAT ISSUED THE DECREE THAT ALL THE PEOPLES IN HIS REALM SHOULD RETURN TO THE PLACE OF THEIR BIRTH TO BE COUNTED FOR TAXATION. WHILE THIS TOWERING FIGURE OF AUTHORITY AND POWER SAT IN THE IMPERIAL PALACE IN ROME A BABY WAS BORN IN A FAR OFF CORNER OF HIS EMPIRE. IN THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF MEN RETURNING HOME BECAUSE OF AN IMPERIAL DECREE A CHILD CAME INTO THE WORLD. THE STORY IS PATHETIC/ COMPARE THESE TWO PEOPLE, THE MIGHTEST OF THE ROMAN EMPERORS IN ALL HIS REGAL GLORY******A BABY. SO INSIGNIFICANT, SO UTTERLY UNIMPORTANT THAT HIS BIRTH TOOK PLACE IN A STABLE. COULD THERE POSSIBLY BE ANY QUESTION AS TO THE MORE SIGNIFICANT OF THE TWO?

LUKE IS NOT ACTING AS A HISTORIAN RECORDING FACTS AS THEY OCCUR. RATHER HE IS AN ARTIST DRAWING A PICTURE, FORCING US TO LOOK AT THE WONDROUS PARADOX. AN EMPEROR AND A BABY IN A STABLE. TOO OFTEN WE BECOME OVER SENTIMENTAL ABOUT THAT BETHLEHEM STABLE, WE TALK OF SWEET SMELLING HAY, OF CATTLE SOFTLY LOWING, THIS ISN'T WHAT LUKE IS SAYING. HE IS SHOUTING IN THE MOST DRAMATIC WORDS HE CAN FIND. LOOK AT THIS, LOOK AN EMPEROR AND A BABY: APALACE AND A BARN.

WHEN CAESAR AUGUSTINE DIED MEN COMFORTED THEMSELVES BY BELIEVING THAT HE WAS IMMORTAL. ROMAN EMPERIORS ~~XXXXXX~~ AUTOMATICALLY BECAME GODS, HE WOULD LIVE FOREVER. HIS NAME, HOWEVER, IS QUITE FORGOTTEN EXCEPT BY HISTORY STUDENTS.

AND HOW ABOUT THE BABY, HE TOO WAS CLAIMED TO BE IMMORTAL: WHEN HE DIED HIS SUBJECTS CLAIMED HE WOULD LIVE FOREVER. TODAY, TWO THOUSAND YEARS LATER, MEN ARE PRAYERFULLY UTTERING HIS NAME, TODAY ALL OVER THE WORLD MEN ARE SINGING PRAISES IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE STABLE IN BETHLEHEM.

LUKE WASN'T WRITING HISTORY WHEN HE WROTE THIS ACCOUNT. HE WAS PUTTING INTO WORDS THE MARVELOUS TRUTH THAT HAD BEEN REVEALED TO HIM. HOW QUIETLY GOD HAS PERFORMED THIS ACT. HOW INSIGNIFICANT, ACCORDING TO (OUR STANDARDS), IS THIS BABY, HOW HUMBLE HIS BEGINNING. LUKE KNEW WHAT HE WAS DOING WHEN HE DUMPLED THESE TWO FIGURES TOGETHER IN HIS NARRATIVE. WHOEVER READ HIS ACCOUNT WOULD HAVE TO THINK SIMULTANEOUSLY OF CAESAR AUGUSTUS AND JESUS CHRIST. COMPARE THEM, THEIR RELATIVE IMPORTANCE AND MARVEL AT THE WISDOM AND MYSTERY OF GOD.

LUKE MADE CERTAIN THAT IN THE FUTURE, ANYONE WHO READ HIS ACCOUNT WOULDBE FORCED TO SEE THE STRANGE WAY IN WHICH GOD ACTS. HOW THE POWER OF MEN IS NOTHING IN THE EYES OF GOD: HOW HUMAN STANDARDS OF SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPORTANCE ARE MEANINGLESS WHEN CONFRONTED BY THE INFINITE. THEY WOULD BE FORCED TO REALIZE HOW INFINITELY MORE IMPORTANT WAS THIS BABY THAN THE ROMAN EMPEROR HIMSELF.

THE SECOND INDIVIDUAL I WANT TO EXTRACT, AND WHOSE DEEP MEANING LOOK AT IS THE INNKEEPER IN BETHLEHEM.

MARY AND JOSEPH HAD TRAVELED QUITE A DISTANCE ON FOOT, AND ARRIVING AT THEIR DESTINATION BY NIGHT FALL MUST HAVE BEEN EXTREMELY EXHAUSTED. IN HER CONDITION. MARY NO DOUBT, LOOKED FORWARD TO RELAXING QUIETLY IN A ROOM IN THE INN. BUT ON INQUIRING THEY FOUND THAT THERE WAS NO ROOM, ALL AVAILABLE SPACE HAD BEEN TAKEN BY TRAVELERS THAT HAD ARRIVED BEFORE THEM. AS A LAST RESORT THEY ACCEPTED THE INNKEEPERS OFFTER TO FIND SHELTER IN HIS STABLE. AND THERE IT WAS THAT MARY GAVE BIRTH TO THE SON OF GOD, IN THE TRADITIONAL HABITAT OF DOMESTIC ANIMALS JESUS THE CHRIST CAME INTO THE WORLD.

HOW SIGNIFICANT AND SYMBOLIC A ROLE THE INNKEEPER PLAYS. HE TURNED THE SON OF GOD AWAY FROM HIS DOOR BECAUSE HIS INN WAS ALREADY FULL. IGNORANT OF WHAT WAS BEFORE HIM HE GAVE THE WEARY TRAVELERS HIS BARN TO SPEND THE NIGHT.

HERE AGAIN LUKE WAS NOT JUST TELLING A PRETTY STORY. WHEN HE WORTE HIS ACCOUNT HE WAS RELATING WHAT HE HAD SEEN HAPPEN IN HIS LIFE TIME AND WHAT HE KNEW WOULD HAPPEN THROUGHOUT HISTORY. MEN WOULD TURN JESUS CHRIST AWAY EITHER BECAUSE THEY HAD NO ROOM OR BECAUSE THEY WOULD FAIL TO RECOGNIZE THEIR LORD WHEN HE APPROACHED.

CONSIDER HOW LESS MEANINGFUL THE STORY WOULD BE IF THE INNKEEPER HAD WELCOMED THE WEARY GUESTS, GAVE THEM LODGING AND COMFORT, OR IF HE HAD RECOGNIZED

THE OCCASION AS THE BIRTH OF A SAVIOR AND ROLED OUT THE CARPET TO THE DISTINGUISHED VISITORS. THE POINT IS THAT IN LUKE'S NARRATIVE HE DID NEITHER.

LUKE WAS REFERRING TO ALL MEN WHEN HE TALKED ABOUT THE INNKEEPER. YOU AND I ARE IN THE SAME SITUATION AS HIM.

ARE OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TOO CLUTTERED WITH TRIVIA TO MAKE ROOM FOR OUR LORD? ARE THE BURDENS OF EVERY DAY LIFE SO HEAVY THAT WE SIMPLY HAVEN'T TIME TO BE A GOOD CHRISTIN? IS THE INN TOO FULL TO WELCOME THE CHRIST CHILD?

LIKE THE INNKEEPER HAVE WE, EVER FAILED TO RECOGNIZE THE CHRIST WHEN HE DOES KNOCK ON OUR DOOR? HAVE WE EVER TURNED OUR BACKS WHEN OUR LORD WAS APPROACHING? LIFE IS BRIMMING WITH THE SPIRIT AND LOVE OF GOD. THE GOODNESS OF GOD CAN BE SEEN IN ALL OF HUMAN GOODNESS. THE LOVE OF GOD CAN BE EXPERIENCED IN ALL OF HUMAN LOVE. OCCASIONS OF HUMAN JOY AND GLADNESS ARE EVIDENCE THAT GOD IS AMONG US. ESPE IALLY ON THIS DAY AND IN THE CHRISTMAS SEASON WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH THE ALL PERVADING LOVE OF OUR CREATOR. BUT LIKE THE INNKEEPER, YOU AND I, ALL TOO OFTEN ARE TOO BLIND TO SEE.

ON THIS MOST GLORIOUS OF MORNINGS, LET US OPEN OUR MINDS FULLY TO THE TRUTHS CONTAINED IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY. BUT MORE IMPORTANT LET US OPEN OUR HEARTS TO THE CHRIST CHILD.

8/ Let us grasp the beauty and the truth of Luke's story, lets us dig deeper and discover that what he is saying is strategically important, today tomorrow and Forever.

Today we speak of the Birth of our Lord. We will go home, eat a great dinner and Christmas will be over for another year.

Let us make an effort (not to be equated) with the inn keeper. - At this Christmas time let us resolve to keep the inn open. And above all let us constantly be aware of Emmanuel (God with us) This is the crux of Lukes story, this is the crux of our Christmas celebration. Don't stop with the stable in Bethlehem - but realize

2/ that the stable is symbolic of the Fact that God is constantly with us. In Bethlehem he invaded our realm of life, human life, and has never left us.

May the message of Christmas out last it's trimmings, may the love, concern and affection present now extend throughout the year. For a baby is born whose name is Emmanuel - God with us.

Amen